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ABSTRACT

An informal prayer group and church experience program at a day school for mentally retarded children is described, and excerpts from children's prayers and parent reactions are provided. (SBH)

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SESSION LEADER: Sister Mary Mark Graf, Principal of Madonna Day School, Inc.

TOPIC: "Special Religious Education"

TIME: Thursday, April 14, 1:15 - 4:45

PARTICIPANT: Sister Ruth Ann Schmitt, Special Education Teacher, Madonna Day School, Inc.

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Informal Prayer with Special Students of All Faiths

When Sister Mary Mark asked me to participate in this particular session in which we are concerned with religious education for special children, I chose to share with you the topic of "Informal Prayer with Special Students of All Faiths." It is my firm belief that our students have as one of their greatest assets their simple, genuine and sincere faith in a very real God. In my eight years of teaching educable mentally retarded children, I have discovered that in their humble ways they have taught me and remind me constantly of my need, too, to praise and thank God through prayer.

The comments I am sharing with you today have not been discovered in any resource book. The statements are honest and real for they are the reflections of the parents of our special education students at Madonna Day School. In a questionnaire directed to our parents they were asked to reflect and share their ideas to these three main points: 1.) What are your feelings toward our informal prayer group and church experiences? 2.) How have these religious experiences affected you and your family? 3.) Can you see any signs of the effect this part of the program has on your child?

As I hope to reach educators of various religious denominations today, I want to inform you that the situation at Madonna Day School makes for real ecumenism. One-third of our fifty-one students are Catholic, one-third of our students are Baptist, and the other third are of various other religious denominations.

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In presenting the results of the questionnaire, I have slides and taped prayers to share with you so that the presentation can be more meaningful. I would like to begin our slides and tape presentation with the prayer of fifteen-year-old Allen Grumbles. "Dear Heavenly Father, we thank you for the people who are being here. Help those who are traveling. Help those who are sick in the hospitals. Help those who are not sick. Help us so that we can learn about God. Help all the Sisters, the Catholics, and the other religion teachers. Help Father so that he can be a good preacher and help those who were cut real bad in the airplane crash. In Christ's name we pray. Amen."

As you have just heard in Allen's prayer, I am sure you sensed his awareness of others and their needs, of those individuals known and even unknown to him. As one of our parents stated, "...Carolyn often prays for people she does not know. Often it is someone she hears about on the news or reads about. She has great faith that God will take care of all things in His way."

How does such faith and concern begin to develop? As some parents indicated our program is to be an extension of what they are trying to teach at home. In a similar way our religious education program helps the children initiate and participate in family prayer and family worship services.

Our informal prayer groups begin with our youngest class of five and six-year-old students. We begin by having the teacher model a spontaneous and heartfelt prayer to Jesus and then gradually the child can repeat the prayer independently.

This religious experience helps the students become aware of the realness of God, the needs of others, and of their own personal growth as learning to help each other. Here we see two of our youngest students helping each other.

Let me just share a beautiful story about each of these little students. Mark's mother said "...Little Mark's simple prayers have brought his sister and myself to our knees almost every night. We all pray that some day little Mark will bring his father to his knees, too." Shelby's mother shared that "...two of Shelby's favorite words are JESUS and BIBLE. You can tell by the way she says them they mean something to her."

From the teacher-and-child responses, we move on to group prayer. Here we teach the children to be very grateful for all the gifts that God has shared with us. Stephanie, age seven, constantly thanks God for His goodness. "Thank you, God, for all the friends you have given me. Thank you for the principal in my school and thank you for letting the trees and the sun shine today. And thank you for letting us have no rain today. Amen."

The parents stated they they are so grateful that our program stresses the spiritual, social, and academic development of each child. Before we as teachers can share spiritual insights we must know and love our God and then we are able to share God's life with our students.

Our children learn to pray for whatever seems important to them at this time. I asked Harriet to share her prayer with you--just before she was to have her spelling test. "Dear Jesus, help me to be good. Help me to make a hundred in spelling and, dear Jesus, help my Daddy to feel better. Amen."

The students' prayer experiences are then extended from the classroom into our church service held every Thursday morning. The students participate by sharing group petitions, reading a selection from the Bible, or worshipping God through song and dance.

During our group petitions which begin each day in our classroom the children ask their friends to help them pray for someone or something

when they are made aware of a need. These experiences of shared prayer help the children to be proud of their religion. As one parent shared "...Reatha is not afraid to pray in public. During our church-wide candle light service the pastor asked who would start the prayer and Reatha said 'I will.' Her father and I were especially touched as well as everyone else in the church."

These religious experiences are then reflected in the child's everyday life--whether it is while they are working in class, helping with jobs around the school, or greeting visitors. One day some of our visitors were most surprised to hear seven-year-old Horace say "...Thank you for coming. Come back anytime. If you need us just call and we will be there to help you."

This banner "All Children Respond to Love" is the basic philosophy of Madonna Day School. The love of God that we share through our dedicated services to our students will have an important influence upon their own lives and that of their families. I would now like to share some specific ways in which our informal prayer groups and Church experiences have affected the families of our students.

> I had almost lost faith in God, but seeing and hearing such faith in the church services I attended gave me renewed faith.
>
> I have missed church often on Sunday until I realized my son was learning more about God. I now realize that it is important for me as well to learn about God and to be close to God.
>
> Johnny has such a closeness to God. He believes so much in heaven. I remember when my nephew died he took off a Saint Christopher medal he had on and put it in my nephew's casket and said, 'Little Ernie, take this to your brother who is waiting for you in heaven.' Then he turned and looked at me and said, 'Mama, when can I die and go to heaven with God?' Johnny tells me all the time he talks to God and God talks to him. When I ask him what God says Johnny tells me, 'Oh, Mom, you know.' Oh, how I wish I knew!

> Madonna Day School through its religious experiences had not only had an effect on our son, but on us as well. We were led to the Catholic Church through our involvement in the Madonna Day program and joined the church two and one-half years ago and have been very happy.

A few of the parents shared the point that eventhough the informal prayer groups and church experiences were happening in a private school that may reflect the Catholic faith because it was organized and is administered by Catholic Sisters, they discovered that our "Christian Social Living Classes" and prayer experiences did not affect their belief in their particular church. Instead our program is a reinforcement of the spiritual values they are learning in their Protestant churches. As one parent stated "...I am glad that my daughter is able to experience someone else's church and the way they may worship. As she grows up she will learn that there are different denominations but what we have in common is our love and belief in Jesus Christ for all."

As I have been saying then these religious experiences are reflected in our lives and in the atmosphere of our school. Another parent shared that "...when I first walked into Madonna I noticed it was such a happy, friendly place, so inviting, so warm. The one thing I noticed was that everyone was smiling and seemed happy. Now when I go there I actually feel a "lift" when I leave again."

I hope, too, that somehow this afternoon our students through the tape and slide presentation have lifted your spirits and renewed your dedication and efforts. Let us thank God for His Goodness to Us!

SUBMITTED BY:

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